

## War, Religion and Tragedy: The Revolt of the Muckers in Luiz Antonio de Assis Brasil's *Videiras de Cristal*

Sofia Frade

Published for the first time in 1990, Assis Brasil's *Videiras de Cristal* (*Crystal Vines*), subtitled *o Romance dos muckers* (*The Novel of the Muckers*), is a novel set in the Brazilian province of Rio Grande do Sul during the reign of Dom Pedro II (1872–1874), the second and final Emperor of Brazil. It tells the true story of a group of immigrants from Germany who, under the leadership of Jacobina Maurer, fought the Imperial forces in defence of their messianic Protestant faith. Jacobina Maurer's husband used to cure immigrants with plants and herbal remedies, while his wife gave spiritual support to the sick. Over the course of time this woman became a spiritual leader of a small community of Germans and Brazilians, both Protestant and Catholic. Jacobina Maurer called herself the new Christ and, like Christ, chose her own apostles.

In this chapter I set the novel in the contexts of Brazilian history and the ways in which Brazilian novelists, including Assis Brasil, have portrayed that history, before analyzing the role played in the text by classical literature, especially Euripides' *Medea*. I argue that while there are strong parallels between Jacobina and Medea, the novel portrays classical authors as the cultural property of the elite class who oppress the Muckers. Through the figure of the military officer who eventually suppresses the revolt, San Tiago Dantas, the novel explores the dichotomy between the classical literature consumed by the rich, and the truly tragic experience of the poor, taking place in reality.

Most of the German immigrants to Brazil were given some land by the government and left to their own devices; without any kind of support from the Emperor, they had to build their own houses and make a living for themselves. Most of these immigrants' villages lacked access to proper healthcare, spiritual guidance or even food. As a result, the Muckers became quite popular as a

movement. Yet it went on to prompt a violent reaction from both Catholics and Protestants, from the families of the newly converted, and finally from the authorities. Not long after, a real war started in the Morro do Ferrabrás. *Videiras de Cristal* gives us the perspective of the opposing forces on both sides of the conflict and exploits the deep social challenges that underpin the Mucker movement. The first attack against the Muckers by Brazilian troops took place on 28 June 1874, with the troops losing to the Muckers hiding in the forest. The subsequent few attacks were again disastrous for the troops, but on 2 August they managed to overcome the last of the Muckers.

As Jacobina becomes increasingly important, her husband, who used to be the centre of the community, becomes less significant and ends up assisting his wife. Jacobina becomes the main character in the book and is integrated into the religious narrative created by herself as both subject and object, which simultaneously brings her closer and distances her from both her community and from us as readers. This religiosity renders most of her dramatic appeal. She is the centre of the plot and the main character, yet we are given no indication of how she thinks or feels. All we have are her words and the interpretation thereof of those around her.

Luis Antonio de Assis Brasil, an author from Rio Grande do Sul, published his first novel in 1976. He studied in a Jesuit school and received a solid classical education that enabled him to use and develop references to the classics in his novels, although to varying degrees.<sup>1</sup> For example, in 1985, he published *As virtudes da casa* (*The Virtues of the House*), a novel set against the background of the war with Artigas, which took place on the Brazil–Uruguay border between 1816 and 1820. The book is inspired by Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, with the colonel Baltazar Antão Rodrigues de Serpa coming back home from war to find his wife Micaela in love with the French Félicien de Clavière.

*Videiras de Cristal* is Assis Brasil's eighth novel. Several of his previous works focus on his native region of the author. His first novel, *Um quarto de légua em quadro* (*A Quarter of a Mile in Painting*, 1976), is focused on Portuguese immigration from the Azores to Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul. His 1978 work, *A Prole do Corvo* (*The Raven's Offspring*), is a historical novel set during the *Revolução Farroupilha*, a republican revolt against the Imperial government of Brazil between 1835 and 1845. In 1982 he returns to Rio Grande do Sul with *Manhã transfigurada* (*Transfigured Morning*), which narrates the story of Camila, a woman fighting against the restrictions of patriarchal society in the eighteenth century. In 1985, he published *As virtudes da casa*, as mentioned earlier, and finally, two years later, *Cães da Província* (*Dogs of the County*). Again set in the

south of Brazil, the novel focuses on an historical character named José Joaquim de Campos Leão (nicknamed Qorpo-Santo), who lived between 1829 and 1883. He was a journalist, poet and playwright; he was accused of being insane and his own family had him declared legally unfit to manage his own affairs. His personal life was quite dramatic. His works were only fully appreciated in the second half of the twentieth century. *Videiras de Cristal* therefore shares several themes with previous novels: the location of Rio Grande do Sul, home of the author; the war; the social problems experienced by immigrants; the tensions between city and rural areas; the tension between the immigrants and the Brazilians; the fine line between sanity and madness; the role of women in patriarchal societies; and the overtones of Greek tragedy.

After *Videiras de Cristal*, Assis Brasil wrote a trilogy, once more set in Rio Grande do Sul, but since then his most recent texts share neither the location nor historical basis of his previous novels. His historical works correspond chronologically mainly to the dictatorship period and slightly after. This is not an unusual feature in Brazilian literature; in fact, historical novels seemed to flourish during that time.

Brazil was under a dictatorial regime between 1964 and 1985. The military revolution happened, supposedly, in order to protect national safety in times of crisis and was born of a fear that the then-president João Goulart, with his policies of left-wing agrarian reforms, nationalizations and some expropriations, would turn Brazil into a new Cuba. A new constitution was approved in 1967; censorship and persecution of those suspected to be against the regime was instituted. In the 1980s, the regime lost its appeal and in 1984 the first proper presidential elections in twenty years brought democracy back to Brazil. During these years, the relationship of writers with the power changed a lot, as Valente has argued:

It is important, however, to bear in mind that whereas most nineteenth-century historical novels participated in the process of myth-formation sponsored by the elites (yielding what Franco calls 'blueprints of national formation'), these recent historical novels express open scepticism about the modernization project embraced by the elites in the twentieth century. Unquestionably, the attitude of writers toward the established powers has changed drastically from that of partner to that of critic, from collaboration to contestation. Readers have noticed a conscious attempt on the part of Brazilian writers of the 1970s and 1980s to distance themselves from anything 'official'. Looking back into the past was a way to try to understand the present. More than that, looking into the past was a way to talk about the present. If fiction started as part of a program

to define Brazil's identity and to create a nation, united and coherent, during the second half of the twentieth century it turned into a way to address the social problems of the present and still be able to pass through the rigors of censorship.<sup>2</sup>

The themes of historical Brazilian novels are mainly divided between rural and urban, the main source of social differentiation in Brazil.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, the popularity of the rural novel has declined, while the urban novel is still attractive for a more urban and more 'Europeanized' audience. Yet, during the dictatorship period, historical novels blossomed as for some reason, they suffered much less from the repressions of censorship than did other forms of literature, such as drama. The novels became popular within relatively restricted circles, and even though they were not encouraged, the authors had relative freedom.

Silverman has pointed out that, historically, this genre was very important at two moments in Brazil's history. Since there is a chronological coincidence between romanticism and the Independence of Brazil in 1822, the historical novel became a way of defining identity.<sup>4</sup> The novel used autochthonic myths in order to better explain this identity but of course, European and classical myths were not completely ignored: indeed they became mixed with indigenous stories and folklore. Fiction has been one of the principal ways to deal with these ambiguities and these unique realities.<sup>5</sup>

Returning to *Videiras de Cristal*, one of the main themes of this text is the social tension in the colonies of immigrants. This occurs both between the immigrants and the Brazilians, and even among the immigrants themselves. The first generation was able to settle without many problems, achieving a certain degree of wealth and power. Thereafter, however, and as noted above, the incoming Germans were awarded land and left to make their own way. In this novel we find at least three different worlds: the world of politics, with its traditional divisions between liberals and conservatives; the world of religion, with a division between Catholics and Protestants; and finally the world of the poor immigrants, and within this, the community of the Muckers. As in a tragedy with different characters and different episodes, we are offered different views from these different worlds and we are able to understand that at no point whatsoever are they able to communicate with each other. Each lives their own tragedy, unable to understand the others.

The novel presents us with a world that is changing, a world where modernity is just starting, a world where the modern conveniences of Europe are arriving at this less and less exotic and faraway land. The uncle of Dr Fischer – a stereotyped

German living in a German town that resembles a gothic illustration – receives a box from his Brazil-based nephew, who has sent cacti for his uncle's ever-growing collection. When the uncle finds some German newspapers with his plants, he is shocked: 'Quem diria que naquele parte remota do mundo se imprimiam jornais alemães?' ['Who would have known that German newspapers were printed in that remote area of the world?'] (412). Yet this modernity does nothing to help the livelihoods of the immigrants. They remain poor, without any proper healthcare, without any kind of support; even their priests are often not properly ordained. In this context, they turn to what is given to them, and that is Jacobina's spiritual guidance.

The lawyer Fogaça is one of the few to understand the social problems that run through this religious movement:

De quem é a culpa? Por certo não será dessa gente fanática e inculta, posta à margem desse capitalismo perverso que impera aqui.

[And whose fault is it? Certainly this is not the fault of this fanatical and uneducated people, left aside by the perverted capitalism that rules over this land.].

(213)

But even this recognition is used by the liberal Fogaça to attack the conservatives rather than to help the immigrants. In fact, Fogaça is represented in a particularly ironic way: just after saying those words, he is described as fat and bald, barely able to balance himself on top of a box. At no point do the authorities do anything to change the situation for the better. The principal tensions and problems of the characters in the text are those experienced by contemporary Brazilian society at the time that Assis Brasil is writing.

So what is the importance of classical elements in this text? In what ways does Greek myth add anything to the readings and the relationship between past and present? There are various tragic themes in this novel:<sup>6</sup> the way the characters are self-involved; the way that we are shown each character's thoughts and feelings, giving us, the readers, a view of the diverse lines of thought, just as a Greek tragedy's audience would have had, even giving us an equal account of both parties at war, making us see what the characters just cannot see, i.e. someone else's perspective. As the tragic overtones become stronger and the rhythm of the novel speeds up, there is one tragedy in particular that seems to be invoked by the author: Euripides' *Medea*.

In the last few pages, the children of Jacobina become especially important, especially Leidard:

Esta criança, gerada e nacida em nossa fé, ela será o sinal. O seu destino será o nosso destino . . . Leidard, com sua saúde e sua beleza, é a imagem da nossa inocência e nossa verdade, o leite que ela suga dos meus peitos é a bênção que que derramo sobre vocês todos, meus filhos pelo poder do Espírito.

[This child, born and bred in our faith, will be the sign. Her destiny will be our destiny . . . Leidard, with her health and beauty, is the image of our innocence and our truth, the milk she suckles from my breasts is the blessing I extend on all of you, my children by the power of the Spirit.]

(295)

The destiny of Leidard and the community is one and the same. And it will remain so, as the destiny of the Muckers and the baby will be sealed within the space of a few minutes. As the last survivors fight hopelessly, Jacobina makes a final decision about herself and her younger daughter:

– Não. Não a cobrirão de vergonha. – E, fitando Ana Maria com um olhar que já é do outro mundo, diz: – Faça o que seu coração tanto quer. Você já sabe. – E entrega-lhe a criança.

Ana Maria aconchega Leidard nos braços e, sob as vistas de todos, pede ao avô Maurer que lhe dê a faca . . . Quando ela sai da choupana carregando Leidard, Jacobina põe-se de joelhos.

– Leidard era o último elo que nos unia ao mundo. Nada mais nos resta a não ser a misericórdia de Deus . . .

[ – No. They won't cover her with shame. – And looking upon Ana Maria, with a gaze that was already from another world, she says: – Do what your heart longs to do. You know it. – And gives her the child.

Ana Maria holds the child in her arms and, in front of everybody, asks grandfather Maurer for his knife . . . when she leaves the hovel carrying Leidard, Jacobina falls to her knees. – Leidard was the last link binding us to the world. Nothing is left for us except God's mercy . . .]

(407)

Leidard's death is the death of the community, her life is the symbol of the Muckers, and their tragedy is the same. There are a few differences between Jacobina and Medea, perhaps the most important of all being the fact that she does not kill her child with her own hands. Yet there are some points that bring them together and can make us look at the novel in a new way. Both women are foreigners in a land that does not give them what they expected; both are in desperate situations, and both, to a bigger or smaller degree, by their own fault. However, while Jacobina dies, Medea does not.

It has been argued that the text, despite having many connections with Greek tragedy, cannot be viewed as such, because of the Christian context underlying it: there is always hope.<sup>7</sup> I would like to go back to the phrase: 'O seu destino será o nosso destino.' ('Her destiny will be our destiny.') This phrase has no connections with Euripides' *Medea*, yet it has with a Brazilian adaptation of the play:

JOANA — Jasão, é importante pra mim. Eu vou mandar as crianças sim, porque meu destino depende disso. Pode deixar . . .

[Jasão, it is important to me. I will indeed send the children because my destiny depends on that. Leave it be . . .]

(Chico Buarque and Paulo Pontes, *Gota d'Água*)

*Gota d'Água* is a 1975 musical written by Chico Buarque and Paulo Pontes. Joana is the contemporary Medea, destroyed by the capitalist dreams of Jason, who wants to marry the daughter of a rich businessman. The play is set in a *favela* in Rio de Janeiro, and the socio-economic aspects of the slums in Brazil are strongly highlighted during the play.

Joana's destiny, like Jacobina's, is closely related to her children. Joana, like Jacobina, dies in the end, killing her children and then herself. In *Gota d'Água* the tragedy is there, fully despite the Christian background, or maybe mainly because of it. The final scene is represented on a stage dominated by an altar, a Christian altar. The chorus sings multiple songs with the refrain, 'Deus dará, Deus dará' ('God shall give, God shall give'). However, in complete contrast to the original Medea, there is no god to save Joana, no divinity to intervene. In *Gota d'Água*, as in *Videiras de Cristal*, the women and their communities, left behind by the strong economic powers, turn to God. Jacobina does so to a much greater extent than Joana, and yet God or the gods seem to be absolutely absent. The last hope is no hope at all. These women are driven to tragic acts by their social and political context, and with them bring their children, or in Jacobina's case, their larger community. They die. And the social, economic and political context that drove them to that point does not alter.<sup>8</sup> By filtering the story of Jacobina through Medea's myth, the novel gives us a new tragic framework and opens up fresh perspectives on the text. First of all, both women are foreigners and both have some mystical power and charisma, yet these qualities are rendered almost useless. In fact, it is that difference that both creates the characters and, at the same time, renders their destruction.

This myth of Medea, especially when filtered by another Brazilian text, and a highly political one, brings this historical novel into the present. As we have seen, one of the main topics of the novel is the social tension in, and fragile situation



of, rural communities. That was a painful reality in Brazil by the end of the dictatorship and the beginning of the democracy. For all the economic progress that the leaders of the country boasted about during the 1970s, none but a small elite had experienced real improvements in their everyday wellbeing. The life of those in remote rural areas, or those in urban slums, was still miserable. The country was assailed by social and economic issues that politics could not and would not address. As in the novel, the movements that threatened the established order were dealt with, but the real problems underneath were not.

It is interesting to see how the classics are used in the text: we have Jacobina as the new Medea, a tragic character and not at all innocent, although her misfortune is far greater than her misdeeds. Not once, however, does the character make reference to herself as a tragic heroine; not once does she make reference to any tragic myth; not once are such references made in relation to her by the other characters. Yet the connections are still there, to be found by the reader, to add a new layer of complexity and a new meaning to the plot. On the other hand, the authorities – and most notably the lawyer Fogaça – make classical references all the time: they love to say things in Latin, to compare themselves to the phoenix, to allude to classical history. But their classical references are just that: references, words, verbal nods to an erudite culture or the appearance of it. Yet they are empty, as are all the discourses that Fogaça provides us with to explore the deep problems of that community; they serve their own interests and their own ideology. The true classics, the real tragic action, is happening silently elsewhere, where no one recognizes it as classic or tragic, where erudition is completely absent; but there, only there, do the myths come to life again, in the misery, in the despair, in the poverty.

I believe that this very fragile contradiction would have been destroyed had the references to Medea been made more explicit, since it is precisely the fact that the main characters do not recognize themselves as ‘classical’ or ‘tragic’ that gives them their truly tragic dimension. Jacobina does not recognize herself as a Medea; that would imply a cultural superiority over the rest of the characters that she does not have, and would bring a rationalization to her actions that does not exist in the text. If the authorities recognized her as a Medea-type figure, that would mean they understood the Muckers’ tragedy, and they patently do not. The authorities, the elites, see themselves as the ‘heirs’ of classical culture with their Latin quotes and general mythological references, yet the true heirs of classical paradigms are the ones that have nothing, the ones that live in poverty and do not know enough to recognize their heritage. In this text we clearly have two ideas of classical culture: a rhetorical, empty one; and that present in the



tragedy of the quotidian. These two positions are irreconcilable, for the ones owning the first cannot understand the meaning of the second, while the ones living the second cannot distance themselves enough to understand it. Only the reader can understand them, but for that s/he has to let go of the empty formulas, of the 'elite' version of myth, and be able to recognize them in the actions, in the suffering of the people.

Finally, in a character that has been noted to be a sort of alter ego of the author, at the end of *Videiras de Cristal* there are a few remarks that help us understand the real meaning of the text. They startle us into realizing we are not just facing words, or plots or characters, but we are facing the present, the reality, the pain, the misery of real people, those who may be our own neighbours today. San Tiago Dantas is the captain who will eventually gain the military victory over Jacobina and her followers. But he is also objective and can see what is happening with the author's eyes. There are at least three moments in the text where this becomes very evident. In the first of these moments we see this character using the military expedition as a basis for his literary endeavours:

– A propósito, Capitão, vi que você escrevia numa caderneta quando cheguei ao cemitério.

– São anotações.

– Que anotações?

– Anotações para um livro que desejo publicar depois desta campanha.

(...) – Faça como achar melhor. Só lhe digo uma coisa: estamos numa operação militar. Isto não é uma página de literatura.

– Mas um dia poderá ser, Coronel. Quando os fatos desaparecem, fica apenas a literatura.

[– By the way, Captain, I saw you writing on a notepad when I arrived at the cemetery.

– I'm taking notes.

– What kind of notes?

– Notes for a book I want to publish after this campaign.

– Do as you wish. I just want to tell you something: we are in the midst of a military operation. This is not a page of literature.

– But one day it could be, Colonel. When the facts disappear, only literature remains.]

(456)

In this first conversation between Captain Dantas and Colonel Genuíno, it is the latter who reminds the former that what is happening around them is not just a

basis for literature. Dantas' initial reaction to the Mucker crisis is to see it as material for literature to be written after the event. Obviously, with his affirmation that 'But one day it could be, Colonel', there is a break in the narrative. The readers know that the events they are reading about *will* be turned into literature; they are reading an account of them in the form of a work of fiction. This is the first stage for the reading of this novel: this is literature. Yet, there is still some way to go before the literature is created. And not much later, we have a shift of perspective from Dantas:

San Tiago Dantas relê o que escreveu. Excesso de adjetivos, excesso de advérbios, muitos "quês" dançando na página, vírgulas errantes. Mas como descrever uma tragédia sem ser excessivo?

[San Tiago Dantas reads what he wrote. Too many adjectives, too many adverbs, too many 'whats' dancing on the page, wandering commas. But how to describe a tragedy without being excessive?]

(531)

In this second episode, we see Dantas both recognizing what is happening around him as a tragedy and at the same time being uncomfortable with his own literary style. There is a problem in his text; it is excessive, heavy and full of adjectives and adverbs. The notes turned into a tragedy, a literary text exploding with emotions. The disengaged Captain, who was previously just sketching down observations, is now beginning to relate to what surrounds him and as he does so, he is faced with a literary problem: how to write about such a tragedy?

Finally, in a third passage, reality imposes itself on the literature. There is a complete shift of perspective; reality is no longer just the backdrop, but instead it forces itself centre-stage. The gunpowder leaves a stronger odour than any writing could:

San Tiago Dantas fecha a caderneta de anotações, guarda-a no alforje de couro e bafeja as mãos. Será mesmo que de toda a tragédia ficarão apenas aquelas frases ornamentais, lidas pelos Barões da Corte do Rio de Janeiro entre um arroto e um palitar de dentes? Sente o cheiro acre da pólvora ainda pegado aos dedos: isto não é literatura.

[San Tiago Dantas closes his notepad, puts it in his leather saddlebag, and warms up his hand with his breath. Is it possible that out of all this tragedy all that will remain are these overly decorated sentences, read by the Barons in the Rio de Janeiro court while burping and picking their teeth? He feels the bitter smell of gunpowder still clinging to his fingers: this is not literature.]

(503)



There is a kind of evolution in Dantas; he wants to write a book, so he begins by saying that once things are over, all that is left is literature. But as he becomes increasingly engaged with what is happening before his eyes, he is presented with much more than literature: he is presented with a tragedy, but not a staged one.

In the last passage there is a clear appeal to the reader. There are two ways of reading this novel: either, like the aristocrats, looking at it as a book, as words to entertain them while they eat and enjoy themselves; or alternatively, to look at one's *reality*, to look at one's own hands and understand that what you see is not literature, a fictional plot, a literary tragedy. This is reality; it is happening right here and now. And the realization that this tragedy is happening at this very minute should move the reader to do something, or to remain forever like the burping Baron, listening to a story while picking his teeth.

### Further Reading

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